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SPECIAL ANALYSIS

EGYPT-ISRAEL: Growing Strains in Relations

The serious friction that developed between Egypt and Israel over Israel's invasion of Lebanon has become more severe as a result of the recent US and Arab peace initiatives. A total breakdown in the relationship appears unlikely.

The Israelis were pleased that the invasion did not cause Egypt to cut diplomatic ties. The US Embassy in Tel Aviv reports growing Israeli concern, however, about the depth of Cairo's commitment to the peace process.

Israelis are troubled that the Egyptian media have portrayed Israeli actions in Lebanon as comparable to Nazi actions. They also are concerned about Cairo's freeze on normalizing bilateral relations, particularly its failure in recent months to pursue the Israeli-Egyptian military liaison system. They claim that some recent actions, including perceived trade restrictions, violate the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty.

View in Cairo

Egyptian officials have spoken of a "crisis of confidence" affecting ties between Cairo and Tel Aviv. President Mubarak has described Israel's actions in Lebanon as "a blatant violation of the spirit of peace and a return to the concept of war." The invasion also prompted new action by opposition groups in Egypt and demands that Mubarak take some action against Israel in protest.

Government statements and editorials in the press, however, have reaffirmed Cairo's continued commitment to the Camp David peace process. Egyptian officials believe the Camp David Accords still constitute the Palestinians' best chance for achieving self-determination, because they are signed by Israel and are supported by the US. Cairo fears Israel might annex the West Bank and Gaza if Egypt were to renounce the Camp David agreements.

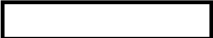
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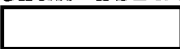
Looking Ahead

Israel's opposition to the US peace initiative and Egypt's endorsement of it have created another impediment to any significant improvement in relations soon. In expectation of Egyptian demands for new flexibility on Palestinian issues, Israeli officials are likely to insist that Cairo demonstrate its continued adherence to the peace treaty through political action. 

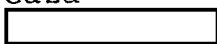
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Tel Aviv will, for example, try to persuade Cairo to renew the normalization process at an early date. Israel might use Egypt's interest in resuming the negotiations on the disputed Tabah area in the Sinai to draw Cairo back into talks on other bilateral political and military issues of importance to Tel Aviv. 

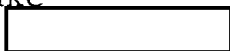
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Despite their concerns, Israeli officials believe there are important constraints on Cairo's ability to take dramatic action in the months ahead. They say Mubarak is having increased difficulty solidifying his political control and that Egypt's domestic difficulties will divert his attention from diplomatic problems. At the same time, Tel Aviv is apprehensive about Mubarak's staying power and worries about the consequences for the Egyptian-Israeli relationship if he is forced from office. 

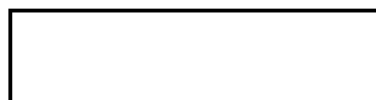
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Egypt is unlikely to return to "business as usual" in its relations with Israel. Despite Mubarak's endorsement of the new US initiative, he is likely to demand Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon and perhaps some Israeli confidence-building measures in the West Bank and Gaza as preconditions for resuming the autonomy talks. 

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In any new negotiations Egypt probably will maintain a tough line because the Lebanon conflict has increased Arab sensitivities about Palestinian issues. The deepening anti-Israeli sentiment among Egyptians will make Cairo more cautious in its relations with Israel. 

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